



La Rochelle, one of the first French nineteenth-century seaside resorts : a dream that failed to come true.

Nicolas Meynen

► To cite this version:

Nicolas Meynen. La Rochelle, one of the first French nineteenth-century seaside resorts : a dream that failed to come true.. Les villes d'eaux en Grande-Bretagne et en France aux 18e et 19e siècles, May 2005, Brest, France. pp.455-473. hal-00471553

HAL Id: hal-00471553

<https://hal.univ-brest.fr/hal-00471553>

Submitted on 16 Apr 2010

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

CHAPTER 20

La Rochelle, One of the First French Nineteenth-Century Seaside Resorts: A Dream That Failed to Come True

Nicolas MEYNEN

In the 1850s, the upper middle classes of Lille visited the Normandy coast, from Dieppe to Granville, or the Brittany coast, from St Malo to Vannes. The people of Nantes explored the south of Brittany and also the Vendée. The ship owners and merchants of Bordeaux preferred the Landais coast from Royan to Saint-Jean-de-Luz. Twenty years earlier, La Rochelle, just after Dieppe in 1822, had been equipped with its first sea baths, the Bains Marie-Thérèse. In spite of this, its visitors were few in the 19th century.

How can we then explain that La Rochelle, while being the first resort on the mid- Atlantic coast, did not become one of the jewels of the French seaside in spite of all its obvious assets? Today, no “*large hotel full of majestic ghosts*” (to take an expression from Marcel Proust about Cabourg) marks the landscape of La Rochelle¹ and, of the three bathing establishments, not one remains. Here and there, however, some villas, some cottages, whose architecture drew from a repertoire of identical characteristics, typical of seaside resort

Abbreviations:

Arch.Départ.Charente-Maritime: Archives Départementales de la
Charente-Maritime

Arch.Mun.LR: Archives Municipales de La Rochelle

Méd.LR: Médiathèque de La Rochelle

¹ The rapid expansion of the luxury hotel trade counts for much in a place's reputation.

settlements, mark the residential quarter of La Genette, subtly hinting at the 19th century attempt at specialisation in seaside activity.

If La Rochelle did not suffer more than any other place away from the Mediterranean from the lack of a winter-based aristocratic tourism, there were necessarily decisive factors that ruined its hypothetical destiny as a resort.

1- The situation prior to the seaside development

La Rochelle had both a port and highly rated fortifications (Fig. 20-1).

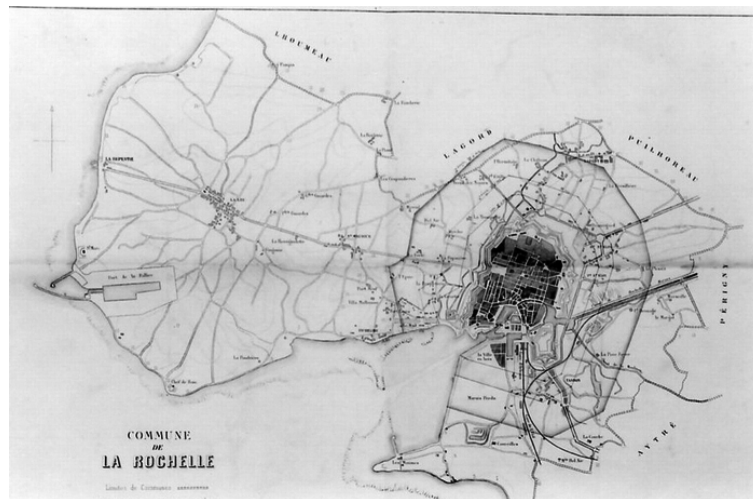


Fig. 20-1. A Map of La Rochelle and its three zones under military control.
Last quarter of the 19th century.

A) The Port²

La Rochelle as we know it, did not originate from some obscure village, but from a celebrated historic port. Its maritime economy,

² Nicolas Meynen, "La Rochelle, ville et ports au XIX^e siècle," in *Des villes, des ports, la mer et les hommes*, CTHS, Nantes, April 1999 (Paris: CTHS, 2001), 171-84.

however, was wiped out by the final closure of most of its New World client industries, notably those in Canada in 1763 and by the bankruptcy of the sugar refineries of St Dominica in 1791. An assessment, brought to the attention of the Minister of the Interior by the Commission of Commerce of La Rochelle, on 7 January 1802, reported that “During the last 12 years, the economy of land and sea languishes both without vitality and without action. [...] And you! Oh our Homeland! Historic and celebrated town! Realize, more than ever, your wishes and your works.”³ Its wishes were those of economic prosperity, of regained grandeur and wealth, and the “works” consisted in the construction of a new harbour lock and the establishment of a harbour sluicing system, in order to allow the port to be more competitive.

B) The Fortifications

Like Cherbourg and St Malo, La Rochelle was fortified. Since the beginning of the 18th century and until the 1902 demilitarisation, the town was considered as an excellent stronghold, thanks to its position on a rather inaccessible maritime frontier. La Rochelle belonged to a military complex, the importance of which was confirmed in the course of centuries. It was the central point from which the army departed to counter any invasion, as well as the store of ammunition and armaments for the batteries of the Aunis coast and the neighbouring islands. It also protected the Arsenal de Rochefort. Its practically oblong bastioned ramparts contain an area of about 60,000 m². The port and the fortifications formed an entity, as the ramparts marked the exact limit of the district, giving protection to the population and goods, effectively guarding the city against toll fraud. The urban space seemed confined to limited dimensions until the addition of the Saint-Maurice district in 1858. Other districts began beyond glacis and some floodable terrain, which completed the fortifications.

2- Assets

La Rochelle had some real potential for the launching of a seaside enterprise.

³ Méd. LR, 24 343C.

A) A broadminded and cultural tradition

Taking advantage of the early vogue for the seaside, the creation of the first sea baths establishment at La Rochelle in 1827 (5 years after the Bains Caroline at Dieppe) derived from the wish and ambition of some members of the local bourgeoisie,⁴ who wanted to lift the town out of its economic doldrums “at least to give it a little activity and life.” The reasons for the installation of the sea baths were more profound than a simple wish to copy the establishments of the Baltic shores, the dykes of Holland, or of the English coasts.

The precocity of the La Rochelle Project rhymed well with its identity, characterised by an open-mindedness inherited from a maritime past. Since the 17th century, La Rochelle had welcomed merchants from North-Western France (Brittany), as well as Irish and Flemish merchants.

The generosity of scholarly Societies testifies to the existence of an important local cultural life. To use the sentence of an essayist from the beginning of the 19th century: “The people of La Rochelle possess a large propensity for pleasure that makes them pursue fetes and gatherings with ardour, and a taste for fine arts, above all for music, which they cultivate with success.”⁵

B) A privileged environment

As shown before, La Rochelle has an eminently favourable location. The only continental port between Brest and Lisbon situated directly on the sea front, it is the last accessible large port before the long unsheltered line of the Landais coast. Its bay, the deepest and best sheltered of Aunis, is protected by the two headlands of the Chef de Baie and the Minimes as well as by the Ile de Ré. This sheltered position was greatly appreciated by ships. The quality of its water and

⁴ All the shareholders lived in La Rochelle with the exception of the director of *contributions directes* from the Loire-Inférieure who was the stepbrother of one of the shareholders.

⁵ Edme-Louis-Dominique Romieux, *Essai historique et médical sur la topographie de la ville de La Rochelle*, Doctoral Thesis presented and sustained in the Faculty of Medicine of Paris, 4 May 1819 (Paris: Didot, 1819), 40.

the mildness of its climate were praised in the leading medical and bathing guides.⁶

C) A first-rate site

The chosen site was on the Jurassic chalk cliffs, which stretch at a moderate height (around 10m) on the west side of the town (Fig. 2). This was an ideal site because it wisely dominated the sea at a period when man had not yet mastered this element.⁷ Besides, nature was perfectly preserved there, making it an ideal spot to invent a place which would procure a *Crusoe-like experience*.⁸ On 21 June 1842, one could read in the *Echo Rochelais*:

The works of art have triumphed over the nature of an unproductive soil and the pernicious influence of salt air: thick vegetation has shot up everywhere, winding lanes cut through an undulating landscape. Good taste and foresight are apparent everywhere.

In 1850, an English lady published in London an account of her stay in La Rochelle: “The garden which surrounds the bathing establishment [...] is one of the most beautiful natural artistic creations. There [...] riders [...] contemplate one of the most imposing sights of nature, the Ocean.”⁹ (Fig. 20-3).

⁶ It is necessary to remember that the first development of bathing establishments is linked to medicine. In 1750, the essay of Dr Russell determined for more than a century the medical knowledge concerning therapeutic bathing. Dr Richard Russell, *A Dissertation on the Use of Seawater in the Diseases of the Glands*, (London, 1750). Like all similar respectable places, La Rochelle had a medical report on its baths drawn up by Dr Gaste. Dr L.F. Gaste, *Essai sur les bains Marie-Thérèse, ou considérations historiques et médicales sur les bains* (La Rochelle: Mareschal, 1829). It is a work of both medical analysis and promotion for La Rochelle.

⁷ The sea was at that time believed to be a dangerous place.

⁸ This of course alludes to Daniel Defoes's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a work which contributed to a change in the negative image of the sea.

⁹ It is the sublime sensation created by the sea. According to Schleiermacher, “*La contemplation de l'Univers [...] est la forme la plus générale et la plus élevée de la religion.*” Reported by the *Journal de la Charente-Inférieure* (30 June 1850).

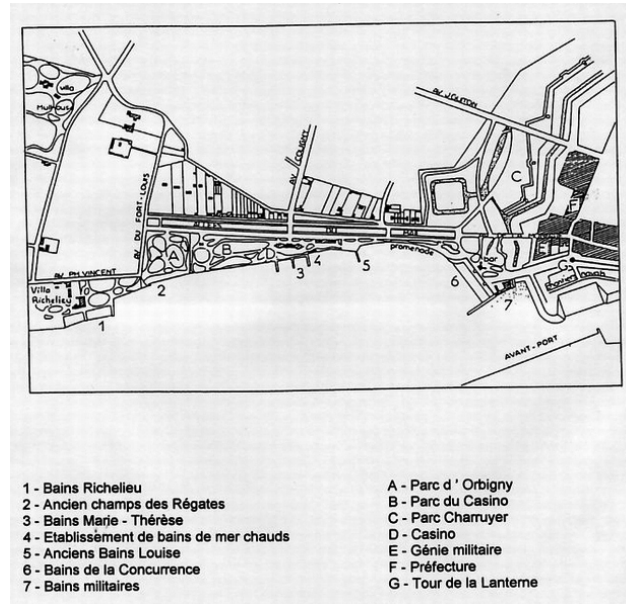


Fig. 20-2. La Rochelle's baths.



Fig. 20-3. Sea-bathing at la Rochelle, with a frontage overlooking the Mail (1841), a lithograph by Charpentier.

The chosen site could not have been better situated: it bordered the Mail (Fig. 20-2), the only lane of La Rochelle which had offered pleasurable walks since the 16th century. The baths being created in this same place, leisure and practical seaside activities were therefore sectorized.

D) The Heritage of La Rochelle

The final key factor for the location was its proximity to the city of La Rochelle and its Heritage.¹⁰ The establishment made use of the picturesque qualities of the fishing port and the town of La Rochelle, which people could see from their terraces:

One senses then the present inheritance of something indestructible, which the haunted land and the phantom of heroic centuries have always enveloped, without weighing too heavily on La Rochelle, this likeable town, elegant, hospitable, sun-drenched and of cordial good humour, where Scribe had forgotten to place the scene of one of his cheerful comic dramas of Madame.¹¹

3- A panorama of the seaside resort (Fig. 20-2)

On this rocky coastline, limited by the drop of the cliff and the Mail promenade, three independent establishments were built between 1827 and 1867. A fourth one was abandoned at the planning stage in 1876.

A) The Bains Marie-Thérèse¹² (Fig. 2, n°3)

The first of them, situated some 500 metres from the town, was created in 1827 by people from La Rochelle, who founded a Limited Company with a capital of 120,000 francs.¹³ Les *Bains Marie-Thérèse*, also called the *Bains du Mail*, a public establishment

¹⁰ Ports are true doorsteps to the imagination. A. Mathé, "Le port, un seuil pour l'imaginaire," *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, 55-56 (March 1993): 183-198.

¹¹ Testimony of J.J. Weiss published in *Débats* 6 September 1861.

¹² Nicolas Meynen, "Les Bains Marie-Thérèse à La Rochelle au XIX^e siècle," *Revue de la Saintonge et de l'Aunis*, 24 (1988): 61-82.

¹³ Arch.Départ.Charente-Maritime, 13M3. Statuts de la Société Anonyme des Bains de mer, 12 juin 1826.

providing hot and cold sea baths, activities and games, were modelled on the Bains Caroline at Dieppe: “Some people came here for health reasons and others for pleasure, which resulted in a charming society and brilliant fetes which are organised by the administration of this hospital.”¹⁴

Jean-Charles Gon, a company member entrusted with project development, opted for a simple and elegant neo-classical building, perfectly suited to its purpose.¹⁵ The facade of the ground floor on the side of the Mail was made up of three projections, its entrances decorated in an elegant ionic style. This organisation corresponds with the internal division of the building, with a central communal part which envelopes the leisure facilities (assembly hall and ball room) and two lateral elements—or wings—leading to the baths for men (left) and for women (right). The thermal units were organised in an identical manner: preceded on the left by a meeting room and a games room, and on the right by a refreshment room and a conversation room. Each of them had 8 bath chambers, a shower and a place for relaxing. The bitumen-clad roofs of the ground-floor wings formed a terrace with a view. The two bathing pavilions were laterally prolonged by a portico. On the side looking out to the sea, a long plain facade of 34 columns formed a covered gallery, in front of which extended a terrace.¹⁶ (Fig. 3)

A complex of footbridges and stairs *en cascades* descended to a cliff where a beach of granite blocks had been made up: “The waterside was not level nor sandy as one would wish, but artistic efforts had overcome this difficulty, and going on, the beach became even and lightly inclined.”¹⁷ Conforming to the idea of a building constructed with regard to modesty, hygiene and intimacy, the beach

¹⁴ Améric Gautier, *Département de la Charente-Maritime*, Notice sur les communes (La Rochelle: Mareschal, 1839), 8.

¹⁵ Its neo-classical architecture, typical of sea-bathing establishments at the start of the century, showed some similarities to those of Dieppe (1822-1827) and of Boulogne (1825). The *style antique* corresponded with the moral precepts of the 19th century, with medical science and the social manners of the time.

¹⁶ A discrete Moorish influence can be spotted.

¹⁷ Gaste, *op.cit.*, 27.

was divided into two parts by huge canvases fixed to poles, isolating men from women.¹⁸

*B) The Bains Jagueneaud*¹⁹ (Fig. 20-2, n°1)

The second establishment, a private enterprise, was built in 1848 at the level of the historic *Digue Richelieu* by the Jagueneaud brothers, and named after them. Also called *Bains Richelieu* or *Bains Péan* after it was bought by M. Pean in 1864, it had the great advantage of offering 40 hotel rooms and two large concrete swimming pools, which, at low tide, could be reached from the cliff thanks to an ingenious system of wooden pontoons. This establishment, of monumental neo-classical architecture, was reserved for members of the *haute société*. Like the *Bains Marie-Thérèse*, it had all necessary amenities: a restaurant, a café, games room, reading rooms and salons, sea baths and above all, all the modern apparatus necessary for cures that depended on a complete hydrotherapeutic treatment. The *Bains Jagueneaud* maintained its seaside activities until 1898, when it was sold in lots.

C) The Bains Louise (Fig. 20- 2, n°5)

Of the third and last establishment, we know almost nothing. It was built by Mr Deforges in 1867, halfway between the town and the *Bains Marie-Thérèse*. The *Bains Louise*, undoubtedly of modest proportions, was especially reserved for working-class women. It can be compared to public bathhouses and public laundries, free for the poor, or offering a cheaper admission fee to the working classes.²⁰ It had no accommodation and probably no access to the sea.

D) Doctor Brard's project

¹⁸ We find these characteristics in the structural organisation of lunatic asylums, of hospitals and of 19th century schools.

¹⁹ Simone Perrin de Boussac, "Les Bains Jagueneaud, un grand oubli de l'histoire rochelaise," *Société d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Aunis*, 34 (1997): 1-13. See article in the *Sud-Ouest* newspaper, (3 August 1999), "Au nom de la Villa rose."

²⁰ On several occasions, during the second half of the 19th century, the government had encouraged the creation of model bathhouses and laundries open to the public at a low price or free.

The water treatment resources at La Rochelle were undeniably efficient, according to Dr Ernest Brard, who, in 1876, proposed to create a large hydrotherapeutic establishment using sea- and fresh water, unique in the region, modelled on that at Berck-Plage in Pas-de-Calais (1869). The establishment should have had three communicating buildings: the main central building was to house the administrative and medical services, one of the two wings was to be a hydrotherapeutic installation (cold water treatment), the other was to offer accommodation for the sick. This project was undoubtedly the reason why La Rochelle was entered for participation in the Paris World Exhibition in 1878, with an independent pavilion dedicated to mineral water.²¹ In these circumstances, which seemed so favourable, negative factors however got the upper hand and were to seal La Rochelle's fate.

4- Negative factors

La Rochelle did not possess all the qualities needed for a successful seaside resort. Five major negative factors can be considered as relevant.

A) *The absence of a public image*

The success of a resort depended on a series of successive interrelated factors: the discoverers, the developers and the propaganda resulting from the presence of celebrities, ensured the degree of its renown. Admittedly, the elite of La Rochelle was at the origin of the creation of the *Bains Marie-Thérèse*, but the nobility, being the class that was most influenced by the bathing vogue, was conspicuously absent. It certainly had the patronage of the Duchess Marie-Thérèse of Angoulême, who was willing to attach her name to the first establishment, but neither she nor any member of the royal family came to bathe at La Rochelle, which would otherwise have attracted an influx of bathers.²² On 12 July 1838, the *Journal de La Charente-Inférieure* thus reported the statement of an English lady:

²¹ Arch. Mun. LR, 29 W 32.

²² Alain Corbin, *Le territoire du vide. L'Occident et le désir de rivage, 1740-1840* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), 308. "All resorts initially needed the support of a member of the royal family if they were to attract a distinguished clientele and keep their reputations during the season. In 1812, the future king

La Rochelle misses the seal of fashion. Were two or three fashionable ladies from Paris to visit La Rochelle, that would give it the necessary impulse; these baths would be filled with the sophisticated, they will be frequented by all those for whom fashion counts and who fervently follow and slavishly submit to it.

No painter or romantic writer sang its praises, like for instance Hugo, Michelet and Stendhal at Granville, like Alphonse Karr and his Offenbach friends and Maupassant at Etretat, or like the painters Charles Mozin, Eugène Isabey and Paul Huet at Trouville.

The function of the fort was undeniably detrimental to the image of the place. With its ramparts and its towers, the town seemed to belong to a past world. Contemporary engravings depicted it surrounded by a large wall which underlined the necessity for defence and contributed to the city's frozen character. Contrary to Belle-Ile, the Ile de Ré, with its convicts waiting to be sent to the penal colony at Cayenne, was not a positive factor.²³

B) The zones under military influence (Fig.20- 1)

The presence of the military did not only have a psychological, but also a physical impact. First of all, the rampart was a material barrier between the inside and the outside. In 1830, an anonymous tourist wrote the following lines:

Especially if our visit takes place in the season in which we now find ourselves, we take care to arrive in La Rochelle in the daytime, and complete our promenade before the night, because on the one hand one should not forget that La Rochelle is a fort where the gates are closed at night, and on the other, at this time, it was not lit all night.²⁴

Napoleon III was already bathing at Dieppe; the following year it was his mother's turn –Queen Hortense de Beauharnais; in 1824 it was the turn of Princess Caroline de Naples to come each season. By her presence and that of her court, she brought to Normandy her Mediterranean taste for baths. At Biarritz, the influx of bathers only truly started when the imperial couple spent nearly all the summers between 1854 and 1868 at Villa Eugenie. Between 1876 and 1906, the population of the town tripled.”

²³ Suppression of the penal colony, 17 June 1936.

²⁴ Méd. LR, Ms 2542, Administrative Acts, La Rochelle (1776-1836).

The rampart wall formed a barrier between the town and its rural environment, itself falling under military constraints. These constraints, said to be constraints *non aedificandi*, enforced by the law of 10 July 1791, only applied to property. They did not involve actual dispossession but created a permanent prejudice, by which the possible destruction of property was left to the proprietor. Land, around La Rochelle, was defined by three zones of military constraints, falling under the authority of the military administration. Starting at the foot of the fortifications, they stretched to distances of respectively 250, 487 and 974 metres. These three zones were real zones of non-development, aimed at avoiding the urbanisation of all military installations for the needs of state defence. They served not only to ban construction, but also to avoid any modifications in the layout of the land. In the first zone, no plantation or construction other than see-through fences, without sections of wood or masonry, was allowed. This was a genuine *no man's land*. Beyond the first zone, and up to the edge of the second one, it was equally forbidden to build either in stone or in clay. But wood or earth—though not stone, brick, lime or plaster, unless the latter was used for roughcasting—were sometimes allowed. In the third zone, each building operation was submitted for authorisation to the officers of the Génie, so as to reconcile the interests of defence with those of the local economy. As a general rule, it was possible to construct all buildings, fences and other works with the approval of military authorities, on condition that they be demolished and the site cleared without any indemnity should a state of war be declared. The Company of the *Bains Marie-Thérèse* had to obtain the authorisation of the Ministry of War for building their establishment in the third zone, and for using cut stone instead of wooden sections. Until they were abolished, these military constraints also thwarted the ambitions of the greedy speculators who had their eyes on the land in the vicinity of the Mail.²⁵

²⁵ Thomas Croizé analysed very effectively the evolution of land in his paper. T. Croizé, “Les premiers temps des bains de mer à La Rochelle, Tourisme balnéaire et loisirs rochelais entre les Bains Marie-Thérèse et le cours du Mail, première moitié du XIX^{ème} siècle.” (La Rochelle, University of La Rochelle, 1997-1998). In 1857, six private individuals shared the totality of the property around the Mail. Two Parisians (a merchant and a member of the “Tribunal de Cassation”) three from La Rochelle, also initial shareholders of the Baths (Emmery, mayor of La Rochelle from 1842 to 1848 and from 1860 to 1867;

C) *Situational circumstances*

It is well-known that the situation of a resort is of great significance for its development, notably the presence or absence of a local clientele. La Rochelle's society had no appeal for the aristocracy. The town was hardly influential. Within the department, the weight of its population was challenged by that of Rochefort. While Nantes and Bordeaux doubled their population between 1700 and 1836, La Rochelle slid down, at the same moment, from the 40th national rank to the 71st. Even if its population slowly grew between 1814 and 1836, commerce remained weak and the town became poorer. It lost 20% of its voters—meaning the more affluent members of the community—between 1824 and 1830. Besides, La Rochelle had a limited hinterland: the rural *département*²⁶ of *Charente-Inférieure* saw its population figures decline from 1861 to 1946, and its not very extensive hinterland was hemmed in between Bordeaux and Nantes. The clientele targeted by the *Bains* was thus regional, from the *Vendée* and *Deux-Sèvres*.²⁷ Another situational circumstance, the distance from Paris, was determining for the success of a resort, given the capital's prominence.²⁸ As a result of their proximity, the Normandy resorts on the Côte Fleurie or the Côte d'Emeraude were particularly favoured. In 1897, the Paris-La Rochelle journey took twelve and a half hours. The major road between Paris and Bordeaux bypassed La Rochelle, going through Poitiers and Angoulême. This isolation had some consequences on the bathing activity and also on the evolution of commerce.

D) *Transport*

The development of seaside towns was closely related to that of the railways. This new way of transport was the means to attract the

Sanier, engraver (woodcutter); Paris, merchant), and the Jagueneaud brothers, founders of the eponymous baths in 1848, but none of them speculated or acted as a property developer. The new town of Arcachon, created for Emile Pereire in 1854, illustrates the speculative phenomenon of the "water rush."

²⁶ The rural population represented 83% of the total population of the *département* in 1846 and 78.3% in 1876.

²⁷ Christian Genet, *La vie balnéaire en Aunis et Saintonge 1815-1845*, Royan, *rendez-vous des Bordelais* (Gémozac: La Caillerie, 1978), 63.

²⁸ Rich clients wanted fast and convenient means of transport.

masses. Bad luck for those regions which were belatedly or badly connected to the railway network! After Sète in 1839, La Teste in 1841, Dieppe in 1847, Le Havre, Boulogne et Dunkerque in 1848, Calais in 1849, La Rochelle got its railway line in 1857, before Trouville and Deauville in 1863, Hendaye, Nice and Cannes in 1864, les Sables-d'Olonne in 1866 and Monaco in 1868. However, La Rochelle was not one of those resorts that, until the 1950s, thrived on railway tourism. In fact, the Paris-Orleans company built the station in Tasdon, a southern suburb. It was far from the bathing facilities and moreover separated from them by the fort (Fig. 20-2). It meant that travellers depended on public transport to pass through the fort, and this during the opening hours of the gates.

E) Changing attitudes

Scientific (medicine) and cultural (painting, literature) trends participated in the success of the seaside phenomenon by changing the image of the sea²⁹ and the attitude of consumers. Under the Second Empire, the health tourists changed into “*balnéophiles*” who wanted to taste the pleasures of the Open Sea and sought distractions. The rocky coasts that had attracted the first tourists (Le Croisic, Pornic...) were abandoned in favour of the sandy ones, in particular those who were nearest Paris.³⁰ La Rochelle’s bathing establishments, situated on a cliff, were at a certain distance from the water, while La Rochelle had only one beach, which, besides, was quite small (Fig. 20-2, n°6). It was situated in the first zone of military constraints. The military shared it with “a large number of bathers, of all ranks and stations attracted here by low cost, proximity or a whim.”³¹ (Fig. 20-2, n°7) From the 1830s onwards, this popular beach, known as “La

²⁹ Scientific trends condoned it, while cultural ones gave it an aesthetic image. A. Corbin explains the radical change which took place in the mentality of past Continental cultivated societies. He delineates the way the image of the sea changed in collective thinking.

³⁰ Cotentin, though possessing marvellous beaches, suffered from the fact that it was far from Paris.

³¹ *La Charente-Inférieure* (July 7 1836). A second bathing establishment, called La Concurrency was opened next to the Bains Caroline in Dieppe in 1833.

Concurrence,” accommodated unofficial, non-permanent bathing cabins, an enterprise that rivalled with the official establishments.³²

Changing attitudes also favoured the birth of a new generation of seaside resorts which sprung up on the few stretches of fine sand of coast, between the cliffs and the marshland: La Tranche-sur-Mer, Royan, Fouras and 12 kilometres away from La Rochelle, Châtelailon-Plage which was to become the main challenger to La Rochelle.³³

5- A limited ambition

If one wants to succeed in business, investment is needed. The question is: did La Rochelle truly have the ambition to become a seaside resort?

A) A “*Cercle des bains*” most of all

The Bains Marie-Thérèse, the driving force of the bathing industry at La Rochelle, was born from the desire of a group of local influential people, whose social rank inspired the need for socialising in relaxing surroundings. From then on, the principle of an establishment open to all became incompatible with this desire. On June 12, 1827, only two days after the opening of the baths, the administrative commission decided to reserve entry strictly for ticket holders and bathers. The “Cercle des Bains,” adjoining the Hotel des Bains, was open to all its shareholders. The non-shareholding public from La Rochelle could only be admitted through the sponsorship of a shareholder who was morally responsible for the person he presented. Strangers could very well become part of the Circle by applying for admission to the administrator. The establishment offered numerous and varied entertainments in which only the ticket-holders could participate: “During the brilliant dances at the Bains Marie-Therese, where several hundreds of people gathered, we counted perhaps no more family

³² The military authorised Mr Barreau’s son, licence-holder of the Bains de La Concurrence, to construct a simple one-level building in wood and bricks in 1893 only.

³³ The term “rivalled” is perhaps a bit strong. It should be noted that the Mayor of La Rochelle, A. D’Orbigny, had been the director of the La Rochelle casino since 1893.

heads having an income of less than 3,000 francs per year, from wages or salary than those who had more than 15,000.”³⁴

In fact, the right to bathe did not automatically lead to admission to the dances and special feasts which were by subscription only. The *Bains Marie-Thérèse* enterprise continued because of the philanthropy³⁵ of its shareholders, who recapitalised without ever taking their dividends.³⁶

B) A tardy municipal intervention

The fate of ports is fragile. In order to escape the dependencies and vicissitudes which fashioned its history, La Rochelle had not chosen a sole activity. The municipality hardly showed an interest in «the bathing venture» before the end of the 19th century.³⁷ “Neither the community of St Maurice (where the establishment was), nor the town, nor the department contributed to its foundation,” the administration of the *Bains Marie-Thérèse* stated in an enquiry by the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce on October 8, 1853. A contribution from the public sector was limited to a certain amount of commitments of a private nature³⁸ and to some specific projects like, for instance, the initiative of the town hall to create a register of all the

³⁴ Gaste, *op. cit.*, 45.

³⁵ *L'Echo Rochelais* of August 18th, 1835, reports that the shareholders of that period considered their investments as losses.

³⁶ Archives Départementales de la Charente-Maritime, 13M3-3. Prefect report dated 1st January 1866.

³⁷ The Dinard resort was developed in the 1860s by the Prefect Paul Féart, who built the first hotel in 1859 and the casino in 1866.

³⁸ During the entire first half of the 19th century, more than 50% of the town council of La Rochelle had shares in the company. Fleuriau de Bellevue (1761-1852), who started the project, was the first board director and also a Member of Parliament. (This protestant naturalist, member of l'Institut de France, founder of La Société rochelaise des sciences naturelles in 1835, had contributed both towards the upkeep of the “prefecture” at La Rochelle and the creation of the regional lunatic asylum); Viault was Mayor of La Rochelle at the moment of the company's creation; J. Rasteau was a Member of Parliament and Mayor from 1834 till 1841 and president of the Chamber of Commerce; Emmery, Mayor from 1842 till 1848 and 1860 till 1867 became director of the establishment in 1860.

proprietors offering accommodation,³⁹ or the development of the cliff and the Mail.

The *Courrier de La Rochelle* of 6 August 1896 announced:

August, the month of vacations, [...] it is the turn of our ocean coasts to become the meeting place of numerous foreigners [...] magistrates, farmers, merchants visit the beaches of Royan, Fouras, Châtaillon. Only La Rochelle which we had always known so resistant to everything that could attract and retain foreigners, has not followed this trend [...].

As a matter of fact, since the years 1885-1890, the authorities had started developing that part of suburban La Rochelle extending in the second zone of military constraints, between the Mail and Saint-Maurice road, facing west. Without ruling out the influence of existing cultural and touristic structures, it was the recent polarisation of the port of La Pallice, 5 kilometres to the west (Fig. 20-2), the new relations with that place, the expected lessening of military constraints due to the downgrading of La Rochelle to the second order of forts, and the presence of an embryonic agglomeration which had imposed the idea on the city fathers of a well-devised urban development in this part of the suburbs. In 1889, the creation of the Charruyer park (Fig. 20-2, n°C), situated in the first zone of the western line of defences, was the first structural element. Twenty-two hectares of greenery were an embellishment to this new quarter and embodied the will to clean up the marshland in this part of the fortification. The second structural element was the alignment plan aimed at a regular distribution of the future constructions. However, lacking sufficient means to buy the necessary land for roads, the town saw to the needs of the present rather than to those of the future. It built only the main roads (Avenue Coligny, Avenue Guiton...) (Fig. 20-2), meaning to deal with the secondary roads when the opportunity arose. The town was quickly defeated by urban expansion and readily left the creation of a road network to private enterprise. Careful planning on the part of the council should have permitted the essential cohesion between the town and the suburb. However, the slowness of its execution gave rise

³⁹ A municipal accommodation commission had been appointed to ensure comfortable accommodation.

to small-scale speculation, which was in turn partly responsible for the disorganisation of this complex and for social disintegration.

The third and last structuring element was the buying back of the *Bains Marie-Thérèse*⁴⁰ by the council in 1901 (they were rebuilt in 1905 in an eclectic style) and the construction of a café-bar, which some people called “Bosniac,” on the beach of “La Concurrence” in 1907.

* *
*

La Rochelle has not developed along the lines of the new linear towns open to the sea, their seafronts with hotels and casinos stretching out along vast expanses of sandy beaches. We have seen that, from the start, some conditions were defining factors in its development and destiny. Even if it never became a true seaside resort, thanks to the initiative of a small number of leading citizens, and finally to the freezing of land development by military constraints, La Rochelle created a summer industry around two new structural poles, the new casino-bath complex at Le Mail and the “La Concurrence” *café-bar* which had its artificial beach enlarged in 1906. Beyond a tourist vocation promising wealth, the town council has succeeded in preserving this remarkable tract of coastal terrain which greatly contributed to the embellishment of the town.

Bibliography

- Corbin, Alain. *Le territoire du vide. L'Occident et le désir de rivage, 1740-1840*. Paris: Flammarion, 1988.
- Croizé, Thomas. “Les premiers temps des bains de mer à La Rochelle, Tourisme balnéaire et loisirs rochelais entre les Bains Marie-Thérèse et le cours du Mail, première moitié du XIX^{ème} siècle. La Rochelle,” University of La Rochelle, 1997-1998.

⁴⁰ The company members declined offers from property developers, fearing that the site would be irrevocably spoilt. The town always presented itself as the most appropriate buyer, willing to respect the initial character of the establishment and the beauty of the site.

- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. London : Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1719.
- Gaste, Dr L.F.. *Essai sur les bains Marie-Thérèse ou considérations historiques et médicales sur les bains*. La Rochelle: Mareschal, 1829.
- Gautier, Améric. *Département de la Charente-Maritime, Notice sur les communes*. La Rochelle: Mareschal, 1839.
- Genet, Christian. *La vie balnéaire en Aunis et Saintonge 1815-1845, Royan, rendez-vous des Bordelais*. Gémotac: La Caillerie, 1978.
- Mathé, A.. "Le port, un seuil pour l'imaginaire." *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 55-56 (1993): 183-98.
- Meynen, Nicolas. "La Rochelle, ville et ports au XIX^{ème} siècle." In *Des villes, des ports, la mer et les hommes*, 171-84. Paris: CTHS, 2001.
- Meynen, Nicolas. "Les Bains Marie-Thérèse à La Rochelle au XIX^{ème} siècle." *Revue de la Saintonge et de l'Aunis* 24 (1988): 61-82.
- Perrin de Boussac, Simone. "Les Bains Jagueneaud, un grand oubli de l'histoire rochelaise." *Société d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Aunis*, 34 (1997): 1-13.
- Romieux, Edme-Louis-D. *Essai historique et médical sur la topographie de la ville de La Rochelle*. Paris: Didot, 1819.
- Russell, Dr Richard. *A Dissertation on the Use of Seawater in the Diseases of the Glands*. London, 1750.

